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THE STUDY CLUB

HENRY V AS A DOCUMENT

In teaching *Henry V* one usually accepts the view that here Shakespeare was delineating his ideal man of action. The class is shown how little attention Henry devotes to ethical and legal problems. He accepts Canterbury's assurance that his claim to the throne is just. On the other hand, his marching fearlessly straight onward in every practical emergency shows an absolute self-reliance. He succeeds too. The patriotic fervor of the speeches is brought out by reading them to the class. The glory of the final submission of France is presented as an achievement to be remembered with exalted pride. The pupil thus carries away at least a faint notion of the feeling the play inspired in Elizabethan audiences.

Should this unquestioning apprehension and acceptance of the play be the goal of the teacher? Is it justifiable to assume that the play represents the life of nations truly? Should the pupil build up notions of international justice based on such an interpretation?

So far as the picture of Henry is concerned, the play seems true enough. He was eminently a man of action. No one gathers from the play how much executive ability Henry had. He had to raise the army by indenture or contract. He would contract with a particular nobleman to provide so many men-at-arms, that is, cavalry in heavy armor, and so many archers. Henry apparently attended to such matters himself and organized the expedition by personal oversight. He likewise provided by personal exertion the shipping to take the army to France. Besides, there was the problem of financing. Forced loans—as far as we can see, without interest—were far from sufficient. The crown jewels had to be pledged. Even then Henry could not in many cases pay his noblemen at all. Only the military success of the expedition saved the kingdom from bankruptcy, and that success was due to Henry's ability and personal vigilance during the campaign.

Yet the play leaves a queer notion of the breadth of his powers. Dramatic requirements led Shakespeare to picture him as judge, prosecutor, and jury in dealing with Cambridge's conspiracy. As a matter of fact, the king took no part in his trial. The Duke of Clarence presided over the court of peers which judged Cambridge, Scrope, and Grey

guilty of treason. The king intervened only to save them from the disgraceful penalty of hanging. What is the teacher's duty here? Should he dwell merely on the striking dramatic effects? Or should he pay some heed to the fine English tradition of personal liberty revealed even in this medieval trial?

The claim to the throne is apparently too labyrinthine a subject to take up with a class. A study of the detailed arguments merely dulls the interest. Perhaps some *ex cathedra* statements can be made. Henry had no claim whatever to the French throne, but fancied he inherited Edward III's old claims. The play pictures Henry as flaunted in outrageous fashion by the Dauphin. That was an old tradition and a dramatic necessity. Should the teacher reveal the truth? The French made every concession possible to the English demands. They even sent ambassadors to Henry to make a last effort to meet his demands in order "to prevent the shedding of innocent or Christian blood." Henry was determined on war.

One of the most memorable passages in the play is Henry's soliloquy on the mockery of court forms and regal pomp. The rhetorical magnificence of his meditations and their dramatic appropriateness can be made the subject of admiring study. Should the student be left with this feeling? The impressive contrast between the happy peasant and the careworn king may make one forget to inquire just how fortunate the life of the agricultural laborer really was. If we consider that most of them were still serfs in Henry's time, and that the memories of the Peasant's Revolt of the preceding generation were still fresh, we cannot hold their lot one of unrelieved happiness. Henry's industry and love of justice did establish order and security, and to that extent added to the content of the rural population. Shakespeare, of course, was thinking of his own time. If we consider the poverty of the peasant farmer of Elizabethan England, the bleak, dark hut in which he had to spend the winter, living on salt meat and no vegetables, and the starvation that might come with a failure of the crops, we must conclude that he could not be happy as a king. Moreover, are we to teach our young Americans that happiness is to be found "in gross brain" that "little wots" of the causes of national prosperity? In short, is our teaching to stop with the dramatic fitness of the speech?

In the last place, are the stunning victory at Agincourt and the humiliating conditions of the Treaty of Troyes to leave on our children the impression that the war came to a glorious conclusion for England? Historically, the treaty was the result, not of Agincourt, but of the

murder of John, Duke of Burgundy, by the party of the Dauphin. Though the treaty marks the height of British power in the Middle Ages, it was not an unmixed good. It was not assented to by the Dauphin and his supporters. The war dragged on for some thirty-five years. Only two years later the incessant campaigning brought Henry himself to his death at the age of thirty-five before he had ever seen the son that had been born. The reign of that son, Henry VI, was distracted by the necessity of continuing the conflict in France, even though it brought the government to the verge of bankruptcy. The ultimate loss of French territory led to civil war at home and the murder of both Henry VI and his son. The day on which Henry V decided to break the twenty-five year truce of 1396 was not after all fortunate for England. Should the play be taught to show our coming citizens that Henry's conquest of France was a glorious achievement? Or should the teacher depart from Shakespere to show that the war was after all a disaster?

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